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Forgetting the Britons in Victorian Anglo-Saxon archaeology

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We derive our antiquities of the period of Anglo-Saxon paganism from one source, the graves.¹

How we explain the origins and development of furnished burial rites in southern and eastern England dated to the fifth and sixth centuries AD is the focus of ongoing debate and controversy. Currently, archaeologists and historians have various answers to this question, from the adoption of Germanic ‘fashions’ by indigenous Britons to a mass-migration of Germanic settlers. Many scholars opt for different points on a spectrum between these extremes, including the settlement, accommodation and interaction of Germanic groups with Britons on a local level and the invasion and subsequent imitation of Germanic warrior elites. In contrast, some writers opt out of the debate by arguing that furnished burial is unequivocally ‘Germanic’, whether this be in terms of biological origins, linguistic connections, cultural affiliations or political hegemony.² Yet even if archaeologists and historians sometimes have different answers, they share a common interest in the same question, but it is a question that has two sides. While traditionally we have used furnished graves to address the question ‘When and where did the Anglo-Saxons settle?’, the flip-side of the same question is ‘What happened to the Britons?’

As a contribution to this ongoing historical and archaeological research, this paper aims to return to the very origins of this debate: the study of early medieval

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¹ Thomas Wright, The Celt, the Roman, and the Saxon: A History of the Early Inhabitants of Britain down to the Anglo-Saxon Conversion to Christianity (London, 1852), at p. 399.
graves by Victorian archaeologists. In recent years, several writers have pointed out that the attribution of early medieval graves to the ‘Anglo-Saxons’ says as much about the Victorian search for English national and racial origins and the desire to identify graves as material proof of Germanic settlement as it does about the nature of the material evidence.³ However the specific treatment of Britons in Victorian interpretations of early Anglo-Saxon graves has received less attention. Although it was in the early- and mid-twentieth century that a political context of increasing Germano-phobia brought the fate of the Britons to the fore,⁴ underlying attitudes and antipathies towards Britons can be recognised in nineteenth-century, Germano-philic descriptions and interpretations of early medieval graves.

By using the excavation reports and publications of graves discovered in the period from 1840 to 1870 as my source material, this paper intends to review the different ways in which commentaries upon archaeological discoveries in journals and books consciously used graves to create a narrative of English origins within which the Britons had no place.

Victorian Anglo-Saxonism and archaeology

Building upon the discoveries of the eighteenth-century antiquarians Bryan Faussett and James Douglas, the period from 1840 to 1870 saw a rapid increase in the excavation, identification and publication of early medieval graves.⁵ The dissemination of excavation reports of early medieval cemeteries in society journals and books fuelled the growing middle- and upper-class enthusiasm for antiquarian, archaeological and historical knowledge of the Saxon past. Key figures in the study of early Anglo-Saxon graves and their contents included many of the leading archaeologists, historians and antiquaries of the period, notably Charles Roach-Smith, Thomas Wright, William Wylie, John Kemble and John Akerman. Their reports and syntheses of material evidence provide a fascinating


⁴ S. Lucy, ‘From Pots to People’.

insight into Victorian discoveries. Although these reports are often incomplete, imprecise and inaccurate by modern standards, archaeologists today continue to employ nineteenth-century archaeological publications as invaluable resources for their ongoing studies of early medieval mortuary practices and society. Yet the reports are, at the same time, a valuable source of historical information into the intellectual climate then current and its social and ideological context. Although Anglo-Saxonism as a discourse can be traced through earlier centuries, and archaeological monuments had been employed in debates over English identity prior to the nineteenth century, for the first time scholars believed they had identified direct evidence of the earliest Germanic settlers arriving on the shores of Britain in the latter days of Roman rule. Indeed, instead of seeing archaeology as just the handmaiden of history, scholars like Kemble and Roach-Smith were keen to advocate the value of early medieval graves as ‘illustrating history’ and as providing a more definitive proof of England’s Teutonic heritage than the fragmentary and ambiguous historical and mythical sources. As ideological products of their time, excavation reports of early medieval graves seem to have had a powerful impact upon contemporary attitudes towards the Anglo-Saxons as well as influencing subsequent thinking and research up to the present day.

Forgetting the Britons
In this light, how were early medieval Britons, those thought to have been vanquished or made subservient to the invading Anglo-Saxons, treated by these reports? To answer this question, I would like briefly to explore six themes discussed within the pages of Victorian archaeological reports of early medieval graves: Roman-inspired objects, Roman objects, burial rites, bones, monuments and landscape. Within each theme it is possible to identify how relations between Romans and Anglo-Saxons were perceived. Discussions of artefacts and burial rites appear to have been central to the interpretation of the graves as ‘Teutonic’ or ‘Anglo-Saxon’, and yet repeatedly discussions avoid any mention of the possibility of a British or Celtic connection. Rather than being merely a passive omission, it is argued that within the socio-political context of mid-nineteenth century Britain, this ‘forgetting’ of the Britons was integral to attribution of the graves to a Teutonic supremacy, which would then set the stage for the emergence of the distinctive Anglo-Saxon culture and society to which Victorian Britain looked for the foundations of its civilisation, at home and abroad.

Roman-inspired objects
The idea of period- and subject-specialisation would have been foreign to many Victorian antiquaries and archaeologists. Many of those digging and reporting discoveries of early medieval burials were equally familiar with Roman sites and

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Regarding the artefacts recovered from Anglo-Saxon graves, many were regarded as distinctively ‘Teutonic’, such as weapons and pottery, but others were thought to demonstrate the transmission of craft skills and techniques from Romans to Saxons. For example, Wright and Roach-Smith noted similarities between Roman and Saxon pins, shears, tweezers, combs, mirrors and bracelets, while Anglo-Saxon glass vessels were regarded as owing a debt of ‘origin and influence’ to Roman glass-making. Some Anglo-Saxon metalwork was thought to follow Roman styles, with John Akerman even suggesting that Roman and Saxon brooches showed both similarities in form and also in their use as an element of female costume. Overall, Roach-Smith believed that: ‘it is not difficult to trace most of the Saxon and Frankish ornamental designs to a Roman origin …’. He thought this was especially the case for the Anglo-Saxon graves of Kent, where the proliferation of ‘Roman’ inspired objects was interpreted as reflective of the comparatively high level of civilisation of this kingdom. For example, the garnet disc brooch from Faversham was described by Roach-Smith as demonstrating the ‘superior wealth and refinement of the Kentish Saxons, and … how much they had profited by Roman art and artists’. The material evidence thus identified Kent in particular as heir to Rome, so the more ready and willing to re-adopt Roman Christianity. In contrast, this author has been unable to find a single instance where Celtic or British influence was explicitly suggested regarding any object in an early medieval grave, nor were Britons referred to as potential bearers or transmitters of Roman art to the Saxons.

Re-used Roman objects
As well as identifying Roman-inspired objects, Victorian archaeologists recognised old Roman objects which had been re-used and interred in Anglo-Saxon graves. In some instances such objects were used to suggest dates for the graves. For instance, a late Roman brooch from a Saxon grave on Bowcombe Down (Isle of Wight) suggested to the excavators a ‘transitional’ date for the grave between

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9 Indeed, Charles Roach-Smith is as renowned for his work on Roman sites as he is for his systematic reporting of Anglo-Saxon cemetery finds: see D. Kidd, ‘Charles Roach Smith and his Museum of London Antiquities’, in *Collectors and Collections*, ed. R. Camber (London, 1977), pp. 105–35.


the Roman and the Saxon periods,\textsuperscript{14} while the mixture of Roman and Saxon articles at Sandwich was regarded by Wright as evidence for the ‘intermixture of the two peoples’.\textsuperscript{15} Yet such comments are rare and most accounts demonstrate a clear awareness that most Roman artefacts in Anglo-Saxon graves were necessarily re-used, including bronze bowls, spoons, hairpins, and, most famously, the Roman intaglio re-set in a gold ring from the ship-burial at Snape.\textsuperscript{16}

The re-use of Roman coins in either bag collections or pierced for suspension inspired the greatest amount of discussion, with some suggesting that they were amulets and others seeing them as evidence of some form of continuation of Roman currency.\textsuperscript{17} In no cases was this seen as the continuity of Britons, since the very coins selected were thought to show a Germanic affinity. One fascinating spin on this perspective comes from Akerman’s discussion of the coins from Kemble (Glouc.), arguing that the preference for coins of Carausius in Anglo-Saxon graves was because this emperor

… was a Batavian, a man of kindred race, who reigned several years in Britain, whose memory must have long survived his fall, and whose exploits in a previous age must have been long remembered with pride by every nation of Teutonic blood.\textsuperscript{18}

Whenever possible, Roman objects were seen as evidence of the inheritance of Roman culture and power rather than the continuation of Roman people and institutions and in every case the ‘Britons’ were not mentioned.

\textit{Burial rites}

As well as artefacts which betray some legacy of Roman Britain within a new Germanic context, Anglo-Saxon burial rites were sometimes regarded as influenced by Roman practice. The use of Roman pot sherds as grave goods was first interpreted in this light by James Douglas, later supported by John Akerman. At Harnham Hill (Wiltshire), Akerman identified water-worn and abraded Roman pottery sherds placed in Saxon graves and called up Hamlet Act V Scene I as


\textsuperscript{15} Thomas Wright, ‘On Recent Discoveries of Anglo-Saxon Antiquities’, \textit{Journal of the British Archaeological Association} 2 (1847), 50–9, at p. 58.


\textsuperscript{17} E.g. John Yonge Akerman, \textit{Remains of Pagan Saxondom} (London, 1855); Thomas Wright, ‘On Antiquarian Excavations and Researches in the Middle Ages’, \textit{Arch} 30 (1844), 438–57.

supporting evidence for their deliberate interment. The practice of burying coins in graves was also seen as a continuation of Roman rites. Similarly John Brent interpreted the provision of vessels with the dead at Stowting (Kent) as reflective of lingering vestiges of Roman afterlife beliefs. Apart from the Germanic choice for weapon-burial and cremation, the practice of placing vessels and personal possessions with the dead led Roach Smith to observe that:

... the sepulchral ceremonies of the two nations very closely resembled each other, with the exception of the interment of the weapon of war, which is the chief characteristic of the graves of the Teutonic peoples.

Both contrasts and comparisons between Roman and Saxon graves were facilitated by instances when graves of both periods were found on the same site. When George Rolleston excavated at Frilford (Oxfordshire), he found five types of grave; two distinctively Roman graves and three characteristically Saxon. The burial rites as described by Rolleston charted British history from the later Roman period, with high-status lead coffin burials and poorer graves with wooden coffins, through the Saxon pagan period, with cremation and furnished inhumation burials, to instances of poorly furnished graves that he regarded as transitional between pagan and Christian.

A final example exemplifies how burial rites were used to infer both racial identities but also racial interactions, albeit concerning an object now thought to be of dubious authenticity. Charles Roach-Smith discussed a cinerary urn from Joseph Mayer’s collection with typical ‘Anglo-Saxon’ decoration and containing cremated bone and Saxon artefacts but bearing the Latin inscription: ‘Laelia Rufina, who lived thirteen years, three months and six days’. Although a clear forgery by modern standards, Roach-Smith thought the urn to be genuine and to derive from the well-known cremation cemetery at Spong Hill, North Elmham:

If the urn came from the ancient cemetery at North Elmham, as most probably it did, it shows that in one instance, at least, a Roman family interred the remains of its dead conjointly with the Saxons, presuming the generality of the urns found there contain the bones of Saxons and not of Romans of a very late time. We have found the Saxons and the Romans reposing in other burial places side by side; and here they would seem to hold the same posthumous relationship. The inference that may be drawn from these facts is antagonistic to the popular idea that the advent of the Saxons into Britain was attended with hostility, and with carnage and extermination of the population of Britain.

20 John Brent ‘An Account of Researches in an Anglo-Saxon Cemetery at Stowting, in Kent, during the autumn of 1866’, Arch 41 (1867), 409–20 at p. 418.
21 George Rolleston, ‘Researches and Excavations carried on in an Ancient Cemetery at Frilford, near Abingdon, Berks, in the years 1867–1868’, Arch 42 (1869), 417–83.
Therefore, Roach-Smith’s passion for Roman antiquities clearly encouraged his view that the Saxons interacted with and adopted Roman customs and beliefs.

**Bones**

So far we have seen how artefacts and burial rites were used to distinguish and infer interactions between the Roman and Saxon ‘races’ while excluding the Britons from the picture, but the skeletons were made to tell racial history as well. Throughout the period in question, craniological and skeletal examinations of selected material from Anglo-Saxon cemeteries increasingly took place alongside incidental observations. Skeletal age, sex, stature, robustness and dental condition, as well as skull size and shape, were among the attributes used to infer race, class and the civilising tendencies manifested by individual skeletons and whole cemetery populations.\(^{23}\) For example, John Thurnam applied this approach to the skulls recovered during excavations at Lamel Hill near York.\(^{24}\) As a rule, elongated rather than round skulls indicated Teutonic rather than Celtic origins,\(^{25}\) while a tall stature was also considered an indication of Germanic rather than British descent.\(^{26}\) As well as race, skulls were viewed in terms of an index of civilization, with the Lamel Hill skulls regarded as ‘Teutonic’ but inferior to modern skulls, indicating a lower order of culture.\(^{27}\) Likewise, for skulls from Harnham Hill, Thurnam combined race, class and intellect in his assessment that they were Teutonic but did not show ‘a high grade of intellectual endowment or mental cultivation’, suggesting that they belonged to ‘… the lower ranks of the West Saxon settlers and conquerors’.\(^{28}\)

A particularly important site used to contrast the bones of Romans and Saxons was unearthed by George Rolleston’s excavations at Frilford, mentioned above. Rolleston was an Oxford Professor of Anatomy and his excavation report dedicated more attention to the bones of the 123 skeletons recovered than to the usual descriptions of grave goods. He noted a contrast between the age profiles of the Roman and Anglo-Saxon graves; with the Roman burials tending to be of older men while the Saxon graves contained younger individuals. He interpreted this difference using an analogy drawn from the contemporary imperial world of Britain’s colonies overseas, as if between

>a civilized Christian village and that of an outlying station on the border-land between some gradually advancing empire, and the territories of some gradually receding but intermittently aggressive aborigines.

\(^{23}\) M. Morse, ‘Craniology and the Adoption of the Three-Age System in Britain’, *Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society* 65 (1999), 1–16.


\(^{26}\) Thurnam, ‘Description’, 132.

\(^{27}\) Thurnam, ‘Description’, 130.

Rolleston seems to be explicitly contrasting Roman with Saxon, therefore. Meanwhile he appears to implicitly admit the presence of Britons in early Saxon England, but consigned to the role of intransigent and faceless natives resisting the onslaught of Saxon ‘progress’. 29

Rolleston then used the shape of crania as evidence for the race, class and intellect of the skeletons. He identified different types of Roman skulls, explained by the fact that both Romans and Romano-Britons lived together and race did not define Roman citizenship. 30 Two skeletons in lead coffins were distinguished as strong and tall; one with a ‘lofty’ cranium was thought indicative of British birth and blood (a ‘Romanised Celt’) while the other was interpreted as broad and low and therefore of Mediterranean (Roman) origin. 31 The other crania were considered less impressive but still civilised, with only one skeleton seen as ‘British’ and assumed to have been a slave. 32 For Rolleston, and for other contemporaries like Thomas Wright, the fate of the Britons is explained not by genocide but by the fact that they had already fled, become extinct, enslaved or inter-bred with more civilised Romans by the time the Saxons had arrived, making their fate or presence then neither important nor relevant. Rolleston envisages Saxon incomers encountering ‘Romans’ in towns but no distinct group of ‘Britons’. This in turn explains why Rolleston does not dwell on his inability to distinguish clearly between Roman and Saxon skulls and even suggests that Romans may have intermarried with the Anglo-Saxons. Such a view perhaps seemed the more acceptable to Rolleston as allowing the Anglo-Saxons to be seen as inheritors of the Roman civilised intellect but not the primitive traits of the British. 33 These examples illustrate that while bones were used to distinguish Romans from Teutons, ‘Celtic’ skull types were only to be found in prehistoric graves and no attempt was made to suggest the intermarriage or even the presence of Britons in Saxon cemeteries.

Monuments
Let us now move on to discuss how the monumental form of graves distinguished Britons and Romans from Saxons. The form of early Anglo-Saxon barrows was seen as evidence of their distinctive racial character. Although Victorian archaeologists were cautious in attributing date and race from the morphology of monuments alone, following the discoveries of Bryan Faussett and James Douglas as well as excavations by John Akerman, Saxon barrows were regarded as comparatively small but typically clustered in large cemeteries. In contrast, ‘British’ (i.e. prehistoric) and Roman barrows were deemed to be larger and of more distinctive character. 34 For instance, John Akerman was able to contrast his discovery

of Saxon barrows on Breach Down in Kent, with British barrows uncovered and reported in the pages of *Archaeologia*.\(^{35}\) Indeed, the well-known conical barrows at the Bartlow Hills, Ashdon (Essex), were systematically excavated by John Gage and published in the pages of *Archaeologia*, seemingly indicating a link between the external form of the monument and the distinctly Roman burial rites they contained.\(^{36}\)

Monuments emphasised racial distinctions in another way. The early medieval practice of re-using prehistoric and Roman monuments was identified by Victorian barrow-diggers at sites like Chavenage (Gloucestershire), Linton Heath (Cambridgeshire) and Oldbury (Warwickshire).\(^{37}\) Similarly, the Peak District archaeologist, Thomas Bateman, uncovered innumerable examples of Anglo-Saxon graves inserted into British barrows.\(^{38}\) Unlike Sir Richard Colt Hoare, who thought secondary barrow burials with iron implements were also ‘British’, many were now aware that these represented graves of separate periods and races.\(^{39}\) Therefore, although the archaeological technique of stratigraphy was still in its infancy, prehistoric and Roman burial mounds re-used by Saxon graves offered to the nineteenth-century archaeologists a clear chronology of British history in microcosm. Each phase of the burial-mound’s use offered a separate and successive phase of settlement by different races. Although this author is aware of few explicit, nineteenth-century interpretations of this monument re-use, it provided implicit support, at least, for the view that the British were ‘pre-Roman’ and had no place in the archaeology of Anglo-Saxon cemeteries. It may have also enhanced the idea that the Saxon invaders were the legitimate heirs to the British and Roman past.

*Landscape*

Although Victorian-period discussions of early medieval graves focus their attention upon the grave goods interred with the dead, we have seen how burial rites, bones and monuments were also considered. Even the location and landscape

\(^{35}\) For example, Lord Londesborough, ‘An Account of the Opening of Some Tumuli in the East Riding of Yorkshire’, *Arch* 34 (1852), 251–58.  
\(^{36}\) John Gage, ‘… a plan of barrows called the Bartlow Hills, in the parish of Ashdon, in Essex, with an account of Roman sepulchral relics recently discovered in the lesser Barrows’, *Arch* 25 (1833), 1–23; John Gage, ‘… the recent discovery of Roman sepulchral relics in one of the greater Barrows at Bartlow …’, *Arch* 26 (1835), 300–17; John Gage, ‘… an account of further discoveries of Roman sepulchral relics at the Bartlow Hills’, *Arch* 28 (1840), 1–6; John Gage, ‘… account of the final excavations made at the Bartlow Hills’, *Arch* 29 (1842), 1–4.  
\(^{38}\) Thomas Bateman, *Ten Years’ Diggings in Celtic and Saxon Grave Hills in the Counties of Derby, Stafford, and York, from 1848 to 1858* (London, 1861).  
context of cemeteries were drawn into the interpretations of the historical significance of furnished burials.

It became customary when discussing Saxon cemeteries to employ the British and Roman archaeology of the environs to provide an historical backdrop to the Saxon invasions. In these accounts, hillforts were regarded as possible refuges used by natives fleeing from the Saxons, while forests and uplands were inhabited by the dispossessed Britons. Meanwhile, linear earthworks could have been raised by Britons as they retreated westwards under the onslaught of Teutonic hordes. Ancient monuments like Wayland’s Smithy illustrated the antiquity of the British presence in the landscape prior to the coming of the Saxons, but they also highlighted that this was a race unknown to the Saxons, a dead race of the past rather than a vibrant contemporary culture. These were monuments ripe for appropriation with new names, myths and associations by the invading Anglo-Saxons. This view is clear in many of the excavation reports and archaeological accounts:

When our forefathers came into this island, they found it covered with Roman towns and buildings, as well as with monuments of an earlier population, in the shape of cromlechs, vast entrenchments and other similar works. With the character and uses of the Roman buildings they were perfectly well acquainted; but they looked with greater reverence on cromlechs, and barrows, and indeed on all earthworks of which the origin was not very apparent, because their own superstitions had taught them to attribute such structures to the primeval giants of their mythology, who were objects of dread even to the gods themselves.

According to this view, the Britons were already a thing of the past.

The location of Anglo-Saxon cemeteries was sometimes used to support the view of Germanic settlement at the expense of the indigenous population, drawing upon images of military conquest followed by settlement very much inspired by the written accounts of Gildas and Bede. When William Wylie explored the Saxon cemetery at Fairford,


Edwin Guest, ‘On the Early English Settlements in South Britain’, *Proceedings of the Archaeological Institute* (1849), 28–72; Edwin Guest, ‘On the boundaries that separated the Welsh and English races during the seventy-five years which followed the capture of Bath, AD 577, with speculations as to the Welsh Princes who during that period were reigning over Somersetshire’, *Archaeologia Cambrensis*, third series 28 (1861), 269–92.


Wright, ‘Weland the Smith’, p. 315.

Wylie, *Fairford Graves*. 
Some of them [the Britons] may have taken refuge, and maintained a precarious existence, among the (at that period) wild recesses and dense thickets of the Cotswold Hills, where the invader would scarcely care to follow them.\textsuperscript{45}

Relationships between Saxon cemeteries and Roman sites also fuelled the imagination of early archaeologists. Many painted a picture of a late-Roman landscape of villas, towns and forts in various states of decay when the Saxons arrived, while others saw the proximity of Roman and Saxon burial sites as evidence of the succession of one race and another. Roach-Smith and Wright were both aware that Anglo-Saxon graves were sometimes found near Roman towns and fortresses and in different publications they came to varying explanations for these relationships, from the expedient use of Roman ruins for raw materials to a model of overlap in which continuities might be seen, particularly in the respect for the same burial grounds.\textsuperscript{46} At Northfleet, the Saxons used localities for burial

… which had previously been used for like purposes by the Romans and the presence of Saxon urns in graves which contained skeletons indicates the partial adoption of usages which customs had stamped as sacred, after those usages had become superseded by others of a totally different character.\textsuperscript{47}

Roach-Smith and Wright increasingly saw this as evidence for an ‘amicable relationship’ between Romans and Saxons,\textsuperscript{48} with Wright even suggesting that Roman life may have survived in towns, while Saxon life flourished in the surrounding countryside, as evidenced by the rural locations of cemeteries, with both races contributing to the emergence of medieval England.\textsuperscript{49} The replacement of Roman by Saxon in the towns was therefore seen as gradual. Moreover, Wright argues that this was a process that began in the Roman period itself with the stationing of barbarian mercenaries and federate troops, so that the ‘Romans’ were in effect Teutonic brothers of the Anglo-Saxons.\textsuperscript{50} The funerary context of this connection between Romans and Saxons is also recognised. At Frilford, where, as we have seen, Roman and Saxon graves were uncovered, Rolleston noted that the ‘rightful succession’ of one race and another can be seen in the fact that ‘The

\textsuperscript{45} Wylie, \textit{Fairford Graves}, at p. 8.
\textsuperscript{48} Charles Roach-Smith, \textit{Inventorium Sepulchrale}, p. xlix.
Saxons … had no reluctance against burying in the ground which held the bones of the former lords of the soil.\textsuperscript{51}

Discussion

How should we interpret this brief review of mid-nineteenth-century studies of early medieval graves? At one level, a short answer seems clear: Britons fail to make an appearance within Victorian interpretations of early medieval graves as an explicitly defined sub-Roman population. They are either assumed to be not present or not important. This is however, not to say that Victorian students of early medieval graves were racial purists. While some regarded furnished cremation and inhumation graves as purely Teutonic, those familiar with Roman material culture entertained the influence of Roman objects, culture and people in the Saxon period as a civilising force, particularly in Kent. Whether violent or peaceful, whether overlapping or discrete, the relationship of Romans and Saxons was successive, the latter replacing and inheriting the landscape of the former. This was a view that Richard Hingley has argued to have grown in importance in the later nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{52} Yet this view could not and would not write Britons into the equation other than as subsumed within the Roman race and Roman culture, as the victims of Saxon weapons, or as refuges fleeing to the hills and to the west. Therefore, if as Bonnie Effros has recently argued, nineteenth-century discussions of early medieval graves and material culture constituted a material dimension to the construction of origin myths for nineteenth-century nation states,\textsuperscript{53} then in an Anglo-Saxon context it was a myth that incorporated both remembering and forgetting. The key element that was ‘forgotten’ was the Britons, and with this strategic amnesia, early medieval graves could be regarded as indisputably Anglo-Saxon, through and through.

To provide a broader context for this ‘forgetting’ of the Britons, we can cite the development of racial theory and of ‘Anglo-Saxonism’, in particular, in contrasting the racial identities of the Celts (or Britons) with that of the Germans (or English) during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.\textsuperscript{54} The origins of British archaeology should be referred to as ‘imperialist’ rather than purely ‘nationalist’, and the celebration of English origins was sustained through being contrasted with native ‘savages’ and ‘primitives’ encountered and subjugated both outside the British Isles and within it.\textsuperscript{55} It could be used as evidence of an inherent racial bias predicated upon contemporary antagonism towards the ‘Celts’ of Wales, Scotland and Ireland among the middle and upper-class Victorian English, exhibited in historical and philological research as well as contemporary literature.

\textsuperscript{51} Rolleston, ‘Researches and Excavations’, at p. 434.
\textsuperscript{52} Richard Hingley, \textit{Roman Officers and English Gentlemen} (London, 2000).
\textsuperscript{53} Effros, ‘Memories of the Early Medieval Past’, p. 276.
\textsuperscript{54} For definitions and discussions of Anglo-Saxonism, see \textit{Anglo-Saxonism and the Construction of Social Identity}, ed. Allen Frantzzen and John Niles (Gainsville, FL, 1997).
In contrast to eighteenth-century antiquarianism, the new emphasis upon racial theory could not suffer the idea of a mixed origin for the English.\(^{56}\)

However, the rejection of the Britons may have other related contexts within the development of archaeological thought. The eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century ‘imaginative’ approaches epitomised by the druidical interpretations of prehistoric monuments by William Stukeley were deemed unacceptable ‘failings’ to the self-consciously ‘scientific’ archaeology of the 1840s and 1850s, the aim of which was the gradual accumulation of ‘facts’ rather than theory.\(^{57}\) Therefore the ‘forgetting’ of the Britons by scholars of Anglo-Saxon graves may have been an attempt to justify current perspectives and distance themselves from attempts to root English culture in Celts and druids.

Equally, many of the scholars of Anglo-Saxon graves such as Thomas Wright and John Kemble were strong critics of the Danish Three Age System then being promoted in Britain by Jens Worsaae (splitting prehistory into ages of stone, bronze and iron), and were dismissive of the sophistication and longevity of prehistoric cultures prior to the Romans.\(^{58}\) For these scholars, Britons was both a chronological and racial term which was increasingly refined as ‘Celtic’ in the mid-nineteenth century with reference to the pre-Roman Iron Age.\(^{59}\) In this light ‘Britons’ simultaneously implied ‘pre-Roman’ chronology as well as a particular racial identity, neatly consigning the Britons to the comparatively distant past as well as to the outer edge of Britain. Conversely, it may have been a deliberate snub to these scholars that motivated Daniel Wilson, Britain’s earliest proponent of the Three Age system, to be among those to challenge the Anglo-Saxon label applied to early medieval brooches and instead to suggest that they belonged to ‘Romanised Britons’.\(^{60}\)

A further influence may have been the increasing study of early medieval inscribed stones from the west and north of Britain. These ‘Celtic crosses’ seemingly provided distinctive material remains for the Britons that could not be more

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\(^{57}\) e.g. Thomas Bateman, ‘On Early Burial-Places in the County of Nottingham’, *Journal of the British Archaeological Association* 8 (1853), 183–92; Thomas Wright, ‘On the Progress and Present Condition of Archaeological Science’, *Journal of the British Archaeological Association* 22 (1846), 64–84.


different from the furnished graves of southern and eastern England.\textsuperscript{61} Similarly, the early medieval sites of Ireland were different yet again, exemplified by the discoveries of crannogs such as Lagore,\textsuperscript{62} and the passage grave tombs such as Newgrange that were assigned to a comparable chronology by writers in this period.\textsuperscript{63} The juxtaposition of such reports with discussions of ‘Anglo-Saxon’ graves at the meetings of the national societies, and often published within the same journal, may have emphasised the distinctive material and racial identities of ‘Celt’ and ‘Saxon’.

In turn, these arguments could be used to encourage wariness concerning the pervading influences of contemporary culture upon our interpretations of furnished, early medieval graves. We might cite the influence of these early studies upon our continuing willingness to impose ethnic and racial labels onto archaeological finds and graves. Indeed, it can be confidently suggested that the very desire to find the ‘missing’ Britons in twentieth-century, Anglo-Saxon archaeology is itself a century-long struggle to renegotiate the ‘forgetting’ of the Britons in the context of Anglo-Saxon graves by the generations of scholars who have gone before.

\textit{Conclusion}

This is, perhaps, an unsurprising discussion given recent developments in archaeological theory that emphasise the self-critical analysis of our ideas, their origins and socio-political context. Yet we can augment previous studies by emphasising the variety of elements of early medieval graves that were drawn into the argument in nineteenth-century studies: not only grave goods but also burial rites, bones, monuments and landscape. Indeed, it is worthy of note that it is in the final theme, landscape, that we see most explicitly the fate of the Britons addressed. This finds a resonance with the contemporary geographical history of Edwin Guest who, while ignoring the evidence of Anglo-Saxon graves, used the \textit{Anglo-Saxon Chronicle}, dykes and the British landscape to chart his vision of the settlement and expansion of the earliest English and the westward flight of the Britons.\textsuperscript{64}

However, I would instead like to conclude with some further points that derive from this review which are highly relevant to contemporary discussions of the Britons in Anglo-Saxon England. If we can suggest that the application of the

\textsuperscript{61} J. O. Westwood, \textit{Lapidarium Walliae: the Early Inscribed and Sculptured Stones of Wales} (Oxford, 1876–9).


label ‘Anglo-Saxon’ to early medieval graves has its origins in Victorian Anglo-Saxonism and, therefore, is not only tarnished by racial theories but also theoretically problematic for dealing profitably and meaningfully with early medieval archaeological remains, then we must equally challenge, and perhaps reject, the antithetical racial identity that was suppressed in Victorian writings. Until we do so, our debates concerning social and cultural change from the archaeological evidence will simply be discussions of how ‘British’ and how ‘Germanic’ was fifth- and sixth-century southern and eastern Britain. It is only when we realise that both terms, and the spectrum of possibilities between them, are based upon Victorian racial constructs, that we can begin to challenge the constellation of prejudices and biases that underpin our academic writing of early medieval archaeology and history. This author would argue that we should forget neither Britons nor Saxons, but equally challenge the meanings and origins of the labels we employ. The challenge then becomes to write new histories from the material evidence that are less obsessed with sustaining a racial and linguistic dichotomy of Britons and Saxons when studying early medieval graves.